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June 29, 2010

Giorgio Napolitano  
President of the Republic of Italy  
Palazzo del Quirinale  
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Dear Mr. President:

I am writing on behalf of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), the world's largest multi-disciplinary society, to express concern over the recent indictments of six scientists and a government official by the local prosecutor in L'Aquila. The charges against these scientists are both unfair and naïve. The basis for those indictments appears to be that the scientists failed to alert the population of L'Aquila of an impending earthquake. However, there is no way they could have done that credibly.

Years of research, much of it conducted by distinguished seismologists in your own country, have demonstrated that there is no accepted scientific method for earthquake prediction that can be reliably used to warn citizens of an impending disaster. To expect more of science at this time is unreasonable. It is manifestly unfair for scientists to be criminally charged for failing to act on information that the international scientific community would consider inadequate as a basis for issuing a warning. Moreover, we worry that subjecting scientists to criminal charges for adhering to accepted scientific practices may have a chilling effect on researchers, thereby impeding the free exchange of ideas necessary for progress in science and discouraging them from participating in matters of great public importance.

Scientists, engineers, and architects can and should play an important role in mitigating the damage from earthquakes and other natural disasters. These experts can identify areas of risk and inform government preparedness plans and policies for safe development, including enacting and enforcing building codes for buildings, roads, utilities and reservoirs. The execution of such plans by the government, along with the provision of adequate resources, has great potential to mitigate harm to life and damage to property. We hope that you will exercise the powers of your office to implement such a plan and to involve some of Italy's best scientists in its design.

The scientific community stands ready to assist you as you examine how science can best contribute to mitigating future natural hazards.

Most respectfully,

Alan I. Leshner